

# THE ABSENCE OF THE GODDESS IN ISRAELITE RELIGION

*by*

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It is a healthy sign of the accumulation of valuable new data and the progress in our understanding of Israelite religion that many will immediately ask if the title of this essay does not in fact beg the question. Can we really say that there was no goddess in Israelite religion throughout its history? What about the epigraphic and artifactual evidence for the presence of female deities in the environs of Israel? What dimension/level/party in Israel is in view when one claims that there was or was not any recognition or worship of a goddess in Yahwism? Such questions are cogent and remind us of the complexity of this issue and of the fact that we cannot say as easily as in the past that one of the distinctive features of the worship of Yahweh was the absence of any consort in the cult or theology associated with Yahweh.

Awareness of the dangers of over-simplification should not, however, lead us to ignore the important fact that a significant stream of Israelite religion, that which later came to be viewed as normative and is represented in the religious practices and theological conceptions of the Deuteronomistic corpus, the prophets of northern and southern Israel, the religious activities of some of Israel and Judah's greatest kings—David, Hezekiah, and Josiah, for example, and indeed the corpus of literature preserved in the Hebrew Bible as a whole, allowed for the worship of no other god or goddess alongside Yahweh. This is reflected in the first commandment of the Decalogue, the Deuteronomistic rejection of the Baalim and the Asheroth/Ashtaroth (e.g., Judg 2:13–14; 3:7; 10:6; 1 Sam 7:3; 12:10; 1 Kgs 15:13; 16:32–33; 21:3–5 and the prophetic indictment of Israel's worship of other gods (e.g., Jer 7:9; Ezek 16; Hos 2). The degree of Deuteronomistic and prophetic reaction on this issue suggests the existence of counter tendencies, and even the radical purge of Jehu seems to have left the door open on this issue, if 2 Kgs 13:6 can be

taken seriously.<sup>1</sup> But the understanding and practice of Yahwism that won out over the long run was adamant on this issue of the sole worship of Yahweh, who was without consort or pantheon. And while it is important to explore divergent tendencies as they were present in the actual practice of Israelite religion (perhaps more extensively than once thought) and to take account of syncretistic tendencies that affected Yahwism, as well as the differences between official and popular levels of religion or even variations in forms of the official or public cult, these should not be exaggerated beyond the weight of evidence or be allowed to vitiate the force of the biblical and other data<sup>2</sup> covering a fairly broad sweep of time, communities, and interests that give us a clear consensus, at least, on this issue. The picture may not be totally uniform, and one needs to take some account of variations within official practices and conceptions as well as those found in more popular levels.<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted further that the presence or absence of goddess worship in Yahwism needs to be looked at as a part of a whole, that is, in relation to a total social, economic, and religious analysis of male-female

1. Ahlstrom (1963, p. 51) has made the cogent observation, "... Jehu allowed the *'āshērāh* to remain in its place when he cleared out and destroyed everything that had to do with the worship of the Tyrian Baal, 2 Kgs 13:6. Had the worship of the *'āshērāh* been introduced by Jezebel, it is certain that every *'āshērāh* in the country would have been destroyed. The conclusion must be that Jehu and his time did not regard the *'āshērāh* as being a non-Israelite phenomenon."

2. For example, the weight of epigraphic data from the ninth through the sixth centuries B.C.E. testifies in behalf of the "Yahweh only" stream of Israelite religion, particularly but not only in the south. From the Mesha stele to the finds from Arad, Lachish, and Ramat Rahel, for example, Yahweh is the only named deity in Israelite inscriptions, and Yahweh's name is mentioned over thirty times. The dominance of Yahweh worship is also reflected in the onomasticon of this period, as one sees from both biblical and epigraphic sources (Tigay, 1987).

3. Most if not all religious systems include variations at both levels. One may articulate, for example, in some detail and with some confidence the nature and character of the Reformed tradition as a branch of Protestantism, that is, write an introduction to the Reformed tradition, a history of the Reformed Churches, or a systematic statement of Reformed theology or worship. In doing so, however, one will need to take account of official variations that are rather extensive, for example, the presence of bishops in some Reformed bodies despite a general Reformed polity quite averse to that, or the absence of any rich liturgy in some branches despite the general example of the founder John Calvin and many liturgical orders in Reformed Churches, or a spectrum of views in official theological statements on the issue of ultimate individual destiny from double predestination to near universalism. Then, if one wanted to investigate the individual piety and beliefs of those who participate in the public cultus of Reformed Churches, one would encounter a multi-hued kaleidoscope of popular religion.

relations. Significant dimensions of that are taken up in an essay by Bird (1987), but such a comprehensive analysis is neither the aim nor the result of this study. Rather, it is my intention to set forth a modest proposal or hypothesis that draws on analogies from the ancient Near Eastern milieu of Israelite religion, a hypothesis that can be corrected and modified as the larger investigation of male and female in the divine and human world of Israelite religion and society continues: The radical centralization of divine reality and power in the deity Yahweh included an absorption of the feminine dimension of deity.

One of the obvious questions to raise about the neglect or obliteration of the feminine dimension in that stream of Yahwism under discussion here is: Does this characteristic arise out of anti-Canaanite tendencies in Yahwism? Certainly the opposition to goddess worship in Israelite religion is in part due to the resistance to syncretism with either Canaanite or Mesopotamian religion and the vigorous insistence on the sole worship of Yahweh. One may recognize here a barrier being raised against the encroachment of Canaanite elements because of the strong role that the goddesses played in the religion and mythology of Syria-Palestine. In other words the absence of goddess worship is rooted in the *Religions-kampf* between Israel and its neighbors, or between prophetic Yahwism and other religious streams present in the milieu.<sup>4</sup>

Such an explanation, however, may not be totally adequate, particularly if one asks about the resistance to or absence of goddess worship at early stages, for example, prior to or at the beginning of the United Monarchy, when the conflict with Canaanite religion does not seem to have been as strong and there was more openness to drawing upon religious aspects of the environment in the shaping and development of Yahwism. In an earlier essay I have suggested that *conflict* between Yahweh and other deities is only one—albeit a crucial one—of the relations between Yahweh and the gods (Miller, 1973). Most analyses of the origins of Yahwism see the worship of Yahweh as rooted in part either in the worship of clan deities in southern Palestine in the second millennium B.C.E., or in the worship of the high god El, or both.<sup>5</sup> That is, Yahweh, as a deity, arises out of religious streams already current at

4. In an extended study of the feminine divine image in ancient Israel and its environment Urs Winters argues in support of the view that the goddess was eliminated from Yahwism in the battle with the Baal cult and that there was little integration of the goddess figure in the deity Yahweh (Winter, 1983, pp. 479–677).

5. One of the more plausible reconstructions, taking account of a broad range of biblical and extra-biblical data, is that of Cross (1973, pp. 3–75).

Israel's beginnings or in relation to deities already recognized and worshipped.

Yet another way of perceiving the relationship between Yahweh and the gods has been suggested by Paul Riemann<sup>6</sup> in the light of Thorkild Jacobsen's work on the history of Mesopotamian religion (Jacobsen, 1970 and 1976). In this understanding there is a centralization of divine power and authority in one supreme deity to whom all others are subordinate. One may find some analogy for this in the development of Marduk and Ashur as supreme national deities in Mesopotamia. Jacobsen describes ways in which the theology and worship of Marduk reflect such tendencies to unification and consolidation. One of these is the tendency to assume delegation of power to a single deity. This is reflected in a hymn of Ashurbanipal to Marduk:

You hold the Anuship, the Enlilship, and Eaship,  
 the Lordship and the kingship  
 you hold gathered all (good) counsel  
 O you, perfect in strength! (Jacobsen, 1976, p. 234)

A more radical way, in Jacobsen's judgment, was "to unify them by identifying their several divine bearers as but aspects of one and the same deity" (1976, p. 234). One text he cites shows that "a remarkable number of major gods are . . . simply identified with aspects of Marduk, that is to say, with functions of his that correspond to their own characteristic natures, functions, and powers" (1976, p. 235). The full text (CT 24 #50, obverse) translated by Lambert (1975, pp. 197-198) is as follows:

Uraš (is)	Marduk of planting.
Lugalidda (is)	Marduk of the abyss.
Ninurta (is)	Marduk of the pickaxe.
Nergal (is)	Marduk of battle.
Zababa (is)	Marduk of warfare.
Enlil (is)	Marduk of lordship and consultations.
Nabu (is)	Marduk of accounting.
Sin (is)	Marduk who lights up the night.
Šamaš (is)	Marduk of justice.
Adad (is)	Marduk of rain.
Tišpak (is)	Marduk of troops.
Great Anu (is)	Marduk of . . .
Šuqamuna (is)	Marduk of the container.
[            is]	Marduk of everything.

6. In an unpublished essay read to the Colloquium for Old Testament Research, Cambridge, 1972. Parts of this essay are summarized by me in the article on "God and the Gods" mentioned above.

One might cite also the fifty divine names ascribed to Marduk in *Enuma eliš*. Jacobsen sees in all of this “a recognizable drive to see the forces that govern the cosmos as basically one and unified” (Jacobsen, 1970, p. 21). “With favorite gods, therefore, a trend away from specialization of power developed and endowed such gods with more extensive, or even all-embracing control: either by assumed delegation from other divine potentates or by seeing the favorite god as sharing in—and equaling—the special competences of major gods” (Jacobsen, 1976, p. 236).

In his study of historical development of the Mesopotamian pantheon, Lambert also takes note of various ways in which merger and absorption took place, particularly in the god lists. He notes that in such lists as AN = *Anum* and AN = *Anu ša amēli* major deities could be identified with similar deities, as in the case of Ninurta and Ningirsu, while minor deities, such as the craft gods, were absorbed into a major one. His summary statement (1975, pp. 196–197) is important.

Thus for one god to use another’s name was equivalent to the merging of the two. Since gods traditionally had more than one name, because epithets by frequent use often became such, it was not necessary to deny the existence of any god that had ever been conceived to exist. The name, and so the existence was transferred to another owner.

The polytheistic framework of Mesopotamian religion, of course, remained. The delegating or sharing gods do not appear to have lost either their power or identities (Jacobsen, 1976, p. 236). In this respect the situation is quite different from the history of Yahweh, to whom the other deities appear always to have been subordinate and without independent identity except as objects of conflict (e.g., Baal), an indication of how thoroughly the drive to unity and singleness of power was present in Yahweh.

If the process and history is quite different in Mesopotamia and Israel, there is, nevertheless, an analogous relationship between the two. Jacobsen speaks in one place of a subtle shift of emphasis in the polytheistic framework as power and decision were centered in Marduk and Ashur (Jacobsen, 1970, p. 20). Elsewhere he suggests in summary that we have here “a unity of essence, as it were, a recognition of sameness of will and power in the bewildering variety of divine personalities” (Jacobsen 1976, p. 236).

Following Riemann’s original and important analysis, I have suggested elsewhere ways in which this tendency to integrate the power and authority of the divine world in one deity makes sense of various features of Israelite religion, such as the nature and role of the divine council and the

absence of myth (Miller, 1973). As with Marduk and Ashur, we have in Yahweh a political deity, closely tied to a people, divine power active in human affairs as well as nature. This tendency to unity and centralization in Yahwism is not, in my judgment, capable of being traced as a slow development within a polytheistic framework. Conflict with that framework seems to have been present at early stages, and the integration and unity is more radical at an early stage. But the absorption of divine roles and powers into the one deity, Yahweh, is an obvious feature of Yahwism, with the difference in Israel being that those roles and powers are never described as having separate identities.

Here also one may gain some understanding of the rationale for the absence of the goddess in Israelite religion, at least a rationale other than the purely conflictual one reflected in Deuteronomistic and prophetic texts. In other words, the extreme integration of divine characteristics, roles, and powers in Yahweh carries with it an absorption of the feminine dimension in deity reflected in the goddess. That would mean, in effect, its disappearance as a separately identifiable dimension because the characteristics of goddesses in the ancient Near East are shared, except for child-bearing, by male deities also.

In this specific case also the Mesopotamian situation may provide some analogies. The god list AN = *Anu ša amēli* gives the various names of the sky god or god of heaven, Anu. The last name of Anu given there is Uraš, "earth", who elsewhere is Anu's spouse (Lambert, 1975, p. 197). "So even a wife can be absorbed into her husband!" Lambert's exclamation mark is a little surprising in light of the long history of the absorption of wives by their husbands, at least in the human realm. Here the female counterpart in the divine world is specifically identified with or merged into the male deity. The name is preserved in the list, but integration and absorption take place.

The process may go a step further in the text quoted above, to which both Jacobsen and Lambert refer (CT 24 #50, obverse). Lambert says of the text that "this has indeed every claim to present Marduk as a montheistic god. The deities being identified with him are major ones of the pantheon . . ." (Lambert, 1975, p. 198). Asking who is left, Lambert observes that only two qualifications have to be made: Demons are not dealt with and no goddesses are mentioned (a few lines are missing from the bottom of the tablet). The demons are a special problem in that they can and have been acknowledged in other monotheistic religions. Lambert suggests further that "presumably the compiler of this list would not have denied the existence of Zarpanitum, spouse of Marduk in his temple in Babylon," and so the monotheism of the text would have to be qualified

by allowing for the existence of one god *and his spouse* (Lambert, 1975, p. 198). The presumption may be correct. It is certainly what one would expect. At the same time one has to admit that the text as a whole is not exactly what one would normally expect in a polytheistic context, and it may be that Zarpanitum is either absorbed implicitly as Uraš with Anu or is simply outside the picture.

No goddesses are named. The elevation of the male deity to position as “the sole possessor of power in the universe” (Lambert, 1975, p. 198) involves the integration of all the divine roles and powers associated with male deities and the absence or disappearance of the female deities. Whatever the structural process involved in such a move, the end result is clear: The goddesses are not present.

The above examples from Mesopotamian religion suggest, by analogy, what may have happened in Yahwism. Either the feminine deity was implicitly absorbed in Yahweh from the beginning along with all other divine powers and so had no independent existence or character, or the radical integration of divine powers in the male deity Yahweh effectively excluded the goddess(es), as seems to be the case in CT 24 #50. In Israelite religion, of course, this was not a slow process that can be traced. The feminine dimension of deity is absorbed or absent from the beginning.

It does not disappear altogether, however, as one can recognize from several facets of Israelite religion:

1) Israelite excavation sites have uncovered a large number of female figurines.<sup>7</sup> The function of these figurines is elusive and much discussed. Some interpreters have taken a minimalist view, regarding them as tokens of popular superstition, talismans, and the like. Their figurative association with known goddesses of Syria-Palestine makes it more likely that they have at least some association with goddesses in the minds of those who possessed them.

2) The inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud, “a 9th–8th century B.C. Israelite-Judean caravanserai and attached shrine,” (Dever, 1984, p. 21) refer more than once to *yhwh šmrn wlʾšrth*, “Yahweh of Samaria and his ʾāšērāh.” The interpretation of these references is naturally a matter of some debate. Important treatments of this expression are found in the articles by Lemaire (1977), Meshel (1979), Emerton (1982), Ackroyd (1983), Dever (1984), Coogan (1987), and McCarter (1987). An additional reference to *yhwh . . . ʾšrth* is found in an eighth century Judaeon tomb site at Khirbet el Qom (Lemaire, 1977; Miller, 1981; Zevit, 1984).

7. An early collection of these is found in Pritchard (1943).

At a minimum one must recognize here a cult object of Yahweh marking his presence, in other words, a hypostatization of Yahweh. How far that hypostatization has taken place in these inscriptions (a feminine deity, the consort of Yahweh?) is not altogether clear. A number of scholars argue that the presence of <sup>ʔ</sup>*āšērāh* as a consort of Yahweh may be inferred from these texts (e.g., Dever, Ackroyd, Coogan, McCarter, Zevit). The presence of the suffix “his <sup>ʔ</sup>*āšērāh*,” and the use of singular verbs with the expression *yhwh . . . w<sup>l</sup>ʔšrth* at both Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el Qom inhibit a simple reading of the texts as referring to the well known Canaanite goddess Asherah. But the fact that the blessing formulas in which this expression occurs at Kuntillet Ajrud usually list only deities as the source of blessings and the separation at Khirbet el Qom of *l ʔšrth* from *yhwh* in a kind of poetic parallelism (the word also is written separately elsewhere on the stone) suggest some kind of separate identity on a par with Yahweh of the <sup>ʔ</sup>*āšērāh* referred to in these texts. The possibility of an easy identification by Israelite worshippers of this <sup>ʔ</sup>*āšērāh* with the great goddess Asherah must be recognized. The fact that Yahweh is referred to at Kuntillet Ajrud as “Yahweh of Samaria and his <sup>ʔ</sup>*āšērāh*” and that 2 Kgs 13:6 says that “the Asherah also remained in Samaria” (even after Jehu’s purge) is suggestive also. Nor should one ignore the fact that we now have three or more references to “Yahweh and his <sup>ʔ</sup>*āšērāh*” in two different and greatly separated eighth century Judaeen contexts.

The evidence from Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el Qom suggests that the fears of the Deuteronomists were well-grounded. The setting up of an <sup>ʔ</sup>*āšērāh* in the *bêt yahweh* was not necessarily the worship of a separate Canaanite goddess but may have been a Yahwistic cult object increasingly understood as the consort of Israel’s God, who along with him could be the source of blessing or salvation. In this manner the feminine in some fashion and at some level comes back into Israel’s understanding of God. The Deuteronomists’ and the prophets’ concern seems to have been less at the point of the feminine dimension than at the danger of the disintegration of the radical integration of divine power and reality in Yahweh.

3) In late biblical and post-biblical times there are other tendencies toward hypostatization of divine characteristics that are characterized as feminine, such as *ḥokmāh*/wisdom and *šēkīnāh*/presence.

4) Specifically feminine characteristics and images were applied to Yahweh on occasion, for example, the imagery of Yahweh giving birth to the earth (Ps 90:2) and to Israel (Deut 32:18), or the comparison of the deity to a nursing mother (Isa 49:15; cf. Num 11:12) and a comforting mother (Isa 66:13).



The question of the place of the goddess in the history of Yahweh will probably always remain an elusive one. It is likely, however, that simple notions of the rejection of the feminine in the deity are inadequate to explain the various data that have accumulated and continue to do so, often in surprising fashion.

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